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COPTIC SCULPTURED FRIEZE, VI CENTURY A.D.

PLANT FORMS IN DECORATIVE ART

NOTE. As announced in the February BULLETIN, there will be installed in Class Room B in the Museum from March 15 to April 20 a novel exhibition, of interest to all lovers of plants in nature or art and of practical value to designers and students of design, a bringing together of plants from the New York Botanical Garden and objects showing the use of plant motives in decorative design from the Museum collections. In this connection the two articles that follow have been written; one by Professor A. D. F. Hamlin of Columbia University and the other by Mrs. N. L. Britton of the New York Botanical Garden.

THE decorative beauty of flowers and of foliage commends them so obviously to the designer of ornament that it seems surprising that they do not appear conspicuously in all styles and ages of ornament. Yet primitive and savage art hardly knew them; they occur only in shapes almost unrecognizable in Arabic and Moorish art, and in "historic" Greek art the rosette and acanthus leaf, both of them extremely conventionalized forms, and in vase painting also the ivy, grapevine, and laurel, are the only ornaments directly derived from plant life. The familiar "honeysuckle" ornament is not a honeysuckle at all, but a remote descendant from the Egyptian lotus-palmette. The full appreciation of the inherent beauty of plant forms, apart from their symbolic significance, began to manifest itself in

Europe only in the later Middle Ages, and has probably reached its highest development in our own times. In Asia, particularly in China and Japan, it has been highly developed for centuries, and Japan undoubtedly leads the world in the decorative treatment of plant forms, both in the variety and in the beauty of their applications. Among the Mohammedan peoples the Persians and Indo-Moslems alone have treated floral and foliage motives with freedom and sympathy; and the influence of Persian flower forms, particularly the rose and carnation, through the importation into Europe of Oriental stuffs and ceramics in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, has been a conspicuous formative factor in European decorative art.

For the Egyptians the white and the blue lotuses were sources of endless forms and combinations in surface-ornament, for both borders and field-patterns; the lotus-bud, lotus-blossom, and papyrus (both the stalk and the head of the latter) and the palm-tree supplied suggestions for capitals and shafts of columns, and other plants, chiefly aquatic, figure in their ornament. To these the Assyrians added the pine-cone (or as some say, the male inflorescence of the palm) and the palm-tree. The artists of Crete, Mycenae, and Tiryns decorated their pottery with various marine forms, among which sea-weed is recognizable, and with conventional plants of uncertain origin. These do not appear in historic Greek ornament, which borrowed the Egypto-Assyrian lotus-palmette, transforming it into the endlessly varied anthemion-motive, added the vine-motive,

and enriched architecture with the carved rosette and acanthus-leaf. Roman art adopted all these and greatly varied them, besides developing new plant-motives, such as the olive and wreaths and festoons of flowers, leaves, and fruit. The acanthus they converted into a motive of extraordinary flexibility and beauty.

But it was the Gothic carvers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries who first made a principle of the systematic recourse to plant life for suggestions of ornament, especially in architecture. Capitals, moldings, arch-soffits, and panels blossomed with a marvelous variety of flowers and foliage, and crockets, finials, and crestings were carved into the semblance of buds and leaves; all these in the earlier periods conventionally stylized, but later copied with increasing realism. The Renaissance reverted to Roman types but varied them with delightful freedom and charm of relief and outline. Meanwhile the influence of Oriental stuffs was showing itself in silks, brocades, tapestries, and rugs, in which the Persian flora is easily recognized. The prohibition of representations of Nature observed by the Arabs and Moors was more liberally construed by the heretical Persians and by the Indo-Moslems, while the non-Moslem Hindus in their own art used plant forms freely and beautifully, alike in textiles, carving, ceramics, and metalwork.

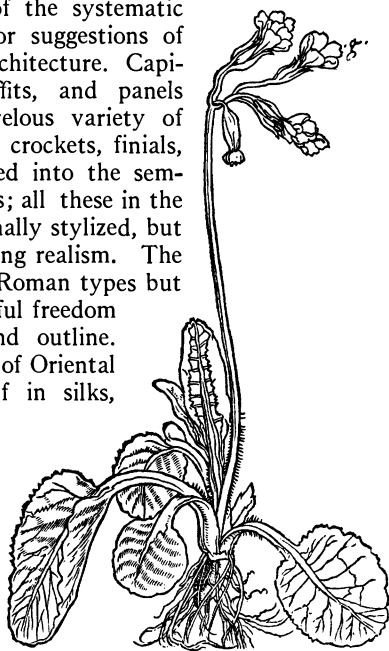
The wonderful naturalistic and semi-naturalistic art of Japan, and the kindred art of China, more fantastic and less subtle but extraordinarily rich, might almost be said to be fundamentally nature-arts, depending upon animal and plant life almost entirely for their character. The chrysanthemum, cherry-blossom, and innumerable trees and shrubs appear in lacquer-work, in carved wood, in bronze, in ceramics, and above all in textile fabrics and embroideries, which Western art has never equaled, much less surpassed.

Modern decorative art, to some extent confused by the wealth of its inherited traditions of the past, has sought repeatedly to emancipate itself from them by a new recourse to the suggestions of plant life. Much sincere effort has been misdirected, under the notion that the structural analysis of plants, on the one hand, or the naturalistic picturing of them, on the other, could take the place of artistic imagination and training in the fundamentals of decorative composition.

Too often the technical limitations and requirements of the crafts have been ignored in designing and in teaching decorative design for the crafts. But our modern craftsmen and designers are learning by the errors of the past. We are learning that from the historic styles, illustrated so richly in this Museum, we may derive lessons of good composition, harmony of line and color, fitness for the purpose and material and craft, of the fundamental elements and factors of beauty in decoration without direct copying.

With these lessons learned, we should be able to use intelligently, artistically, and appropriately, the endless variety of suggestion offered by the infinitely varied beauty of the flowers, the foliage, the shrubs and trees with which Nature has so prodigally endowed our fields and gardens; their beauty of mass, of form, of color; the ordered symmetry of a blossom, the wayward charm of a spray of leaves, the harmony of their colors, the grace of their lines. Nature in all the great ages of art has been not a substitute for the imagination of the designer, but its handmaid and its inspiration.

A. D. F. HAMLIN.



WOODCUT BY HANS WEIDITZ
FROM THE BRUNFELS HERBAL OF 1530